Adversarial National Impartiality

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The Principle of National Non-Elimination Behind the Veil of Ignorance

Conceptual Note

Relations between peoples are never viewed from an entirely neutral standpoint. A person who belongs to a community that considers itself historically subordinated, assimilated, or politically dominated necessarily views the dominant community from a situated position. That experience can produce hostility, resentment, and radical opposition toward the state, its institutions, or even the nation identified with that domination.

A Catalan, for example, may consider that the construction of the Spanish state has entailed centuries of political and cultural subordination of Catalonia and may attribute to Castile a central role in the historical formation of that state. From this position, Spain or Castile do not appear as abstract objects, but as historical forces connected to an experience of domination.

Yet another perspective is possible.

What would that same individual think if they had no idea into which nation they would be born?

This question allows the Rawlsian veil of ignorance to be shifted from individuals to national communities. Imagine a situation prior to birth in which a person knows that they will belong to some European people - Catalan, Castilian, German, Scottish, Welsh, Occitan, Breton, or any other - but does not know which one.

From this position, the advantage of defending only one’s own community temporarily disappears.

What emerges is what we may call a national veil of ignorance.

1. The Difference Between the Situated and the Impartial Perspective

The first fundamental distinction is between two levels of judgment.

Situated perspective

The individual knows their historical identity.

They know which community they belong to, know its conflicts, and may regard it as legitimate to oppose politically those institutions they perceive as responsible for its subordination.

From this position, it is entirely possible for a Catalan to hold a radically anti-Spanish or anti-Castilian attitude insofar as Spain or Castile are interpreted as historical structures of domination.

Impartial perspective

The same individual imagines themselves before knowing where they will be born.

They do not know whether they will be Catalan or Castilian, English or Scottish, German or Polish, French or Breton.

The question changes completely:

> What rules governing the existence of and relations between peoples would I accept if I did not know which one would be mine?

This second standpoint does not eliminate the first. The two can coexist.

A person may be the historical adversary of another community from their actual position and, at the same time, impartially defend the proposition that this community should not be eliminated.

This tension constitutes adversarial national impartiality.

2. Adversarial National Impartiality

Adversarial national impartiality describes a situation in which an individual simultaneously recognizes two apparently contradictory positions:

1. they may politically oppose a nation from the standpoint of their concrete historical condition;
2. they may defend the human continuity of that same nation when adopting an impartial perspective.

There is no necessary contradiction.

What is rejected from the first position is a particular relationship of power.

What is protected from the second is the possibility of a population's continuity.

It is therefore possible to defend the disappearance of a relationship of domination without defending the disappearance of those who belong to the historically dominant group.

This distinction allows us to separate three objects that are often confused:

- the state;
- the political regime or system of domination;
- the population.

All three may be historically connected, but they are not morally equivalent.

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3. The German Case as an Extreme Test

Germany provides an especially clear example.

The existence of the Nazi regime justified its political and military destruction. The complete disappearance of the Nazi state, its institutions, its army, and its ideology could be justified.

But it does not follow that the German population itself ought to have disappeared.

The gravity of the crimes committed in the name of Germany does not automatically transform every German, present or future, into someone whose existence is undesirable.

Extreme cases help us distinguish precisely between:

destroying a regime
and
destroying a people.

The former may constitute a requirement of justice.

The latter requires a radically different justification and cannot be derived merely from the historical guilt of a state.

The same reasoning can be applied, on an entirely different historical scale, to relations of domination between other nations.

A Catalan might seek the end of Spanish domination over Catalonia without this implying that Castile or the Castilians ought to disappear.

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4. Nations Need Not Be Assigned Intrinsic Value

This argument need not begin from the romantic idea that every nation possesses an intrinsic metaphysical, spiritual, or cultural value.

It is not necessary to claim that a nation deserves to exist because it represents a unique manifestation of the human spirit.

The reasoning can be much more austere.

It is enough to imagine that, behind the national veil of ignorance, no one knows to which people they will belong.

Under those conditions, it seems unreasonable to accept a rule under which a community could be eliminated because its ancestors dominated another.

The person accepting that rule might themselves be born into precisely that community.

The continuity of a people therefore need not be justified by reference to its supposed historical greatness.

It can be justified simply through a principle of impartiality.

5. The Principle of National Non-Elimination

From this reasoning the following principle can be formulated:

Principle of National Non-Elimination Behind the Veil of Ignorance

> No rational person, without knowing to which national community they will belong, would accept a principle permitting the disappearance of a national population to be turned into an instrument of justice for historical actions carried out by its state, its elites, or its ancestors.

The principle does not imply that nations are eternal.

Identities may change, merge, divide, or disappear spontaneously.

Languages may be abandoned.

States may dissolve.

Cultures may transform.

None of this necessarily constitutes an injustice.

The principle makes a more limited claim:

> the elimination of a population must not become a deliberate instrument of historical reparation.

This distinction is fundamental.

There is not necessarily a duty to perpetuate every nation, although the desire to perpetuate them may exist and be legitimate.

There is, however, a strong reason to reject turning the disappearance of a people into a policy of justice.

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6. Guilty Nations and Innocent Generations

There is also a temporal problem.

Nations extend across generations.

Those responsible for a conquest, repression, or policy of assimilation may have been dead for centuries, while those who inherit the identity of that community are born without having participated in those events.

If historical guilt could be transmitted indefinitely through collective identity, then every new generation could be born morally guilty of acts that preceded its existence.

This produces a consequence that is difficult to defend behind the veil of ignorance.

A person could be born already considered an enemy because of acts committed centuries before their birth.

We must therefore distinguish between:

the historical responsibility of institutions,
collective political responsibility,
and
personal guilt.

Confusing these categories turns history into a potentially infinite source of inherited guilt.

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7. Catalonia and Castile

The relationship between Catalonia and Castile illustrates precisely this duality.

From a situated Catalan perspective, it may be argued that much of the history of the Spanish state has consisted in the imposition of an increasingly centralized and Castilianized political structure.

Someone who adopts this interpretation may develop very strong opposition to the Spanish state and even hostility toward Castile as the historical core of that power.

But behind the national veil of ignorance another question arises:

Would that same person accept a world in which Castile could be eliminated as a community?

If they do not know whether they will be born Catalan or Castilian, probably not.

They may wish for Castile to cease dominating Catalonia.

They need not wish for Castile to cease existing.

This distinction makes it possible to defend two propositions simultaneously:

> Catalonia must not be subordinated to Castile.

and

> Castile must not be eliminated because it historically subordinated Catalonia.

The first belongs to the realm of emancipation.

The second belongs to the realm of impartiality.

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8. A Universal Rule

The argument gains strength precisely when it ceases to apply only to one's own people.

If one merely maintains that Catalonia deserves to continue existing because one is Catalan, the principle remains particularistic.

But if one maintains that Catalonia must be able to continue existing even if one had been born Castilian, and that Castile must be able to continue existing even if one had been born Catalan, a universal rule emerges.

The same logic can be extended to Scots and English, Bretons and French, Occitans, Germans, or any other community.

Not because all of them are morally equivalent.

Not because all have equally been victims or dominators.

Not even because all cultures are necessarily valuable.

But because, behind the veil, no one knows which historical position they will occupy.

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9. The Paradox of the Adversary Who Must Survive

From this arises a particularly interesting paradox:

> I may regard a community as my historical adversary and, precisely because I am trying to think impartially, defend its continued existence.

The adversary need not become a friend.

Historical interpretations need not be reconciled.

Domination need not be denied.

Nor is admiration required.

Antagonism may remain.

What changes is the limit placed upon that antagonism.

Justice may require the disappearance of the adversary's domination.

It does not require the disappearance of the adversary as a population.

This might be called the principle of the adversary's survival.

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10. Conclusion

The defense of a nation need not rest on the claim that nations possess intrinsic value.

It can be grounded in a more modest and probably more robust way.

If we did not know into which community we would be born, we would hardly accept a rule allowing a population to be made to disappear as compensation for actions in its past.

We may want an empire to disappear.

We may want a dictatorship to disappear.

We may want a centralist structure to disappear.

We may want a colonial relationship to disappear.

We may want a national hegemony to disappear.

But none of these claims requires us to want the population historically associated with those structures to disappear.

In this way, a minimal ethic of coexistence between historically antagonistic nations can be formulated:

> From within my history, I may be your adversary; behind the veil of ignorance, I must admit the possibility that I could have been you.

And from that possibility follows the principle of national non-elimination behind the national veil of ignorance:

> Justice may require the end of domination, but it does not turn the disappearance of the dominant people into a form of justice.

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